The Cloud of Unknowing

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¶ A shortened version of a fourteenth century devotional classic arranged for modern use

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
ESTABLISHED 1817

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWI

This book has but one point—God. It seeks to turn man's scattered attention from finite things into an impassioned attentiveness to the infinite One; to gather together his affections for creatures and consume them in one flaming desire for the Creator; to lead him through the throes of self-knowledge to the eternal serenity of God-knowledge. It is a book of contemplation by which the soul is "oned with God."

Wise directors of the spiritual life have referred to *The Cloud of Unknowing* ever since Evelyn Underhill and others made this fourteenth century English classic of devotion known to modern readers. The years have placed it on a par with the *Imitation of Christ* and *Theologica Germanica* as one of the foundation works of spirituality.

This abridged arrangement has been prepared for the twentieth-century reader in such form that it preserves the flavor of its ancient origin, yet without the archaic words and phrases which have lost their meaning for today.

No. 6944

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

THE SAINT MARY COLLEGE
LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

The Cloud of Unknowing

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A VERSION
IN MODERN ENGLISH OF
A FOURTEENTH CENTURY
CLASSIC

*

Published in association with PENDLE HILL *by*
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THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

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FOREWORD

The Cloud of Unknowing was one of the most penetrating and profound, yet also one of the simplest of the many books of devotion produced in that greatest century of Christian mysticism, the fourteenth. On the European continent there appeared at that time such guides along the mystical way as St. Catherine of Siena, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Heinrich Suso, Johannes Tauler, Rulman Merswin, Gerard Groote and a multitude of others, some of whom were associated with such groups as the Friends of God and the Brethren of the Common Life. In England lived Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, Lady Julian of

Norwich, and the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing,* whose book expresses the ultimate aspiration of the "religious" of his age—union with God Himself. Unlike its famous equally anonymous near contemporaries, *The Imitation of Christ* and the *Theologia Germanica,* it is concerned only with the highest level of religious achievement.

The fourteenth century, like our present time, was an epoch of transition, but it was transition in the opposite direction. The great age of faith, when the human relation to the superhuman was all that mattered, was just beginning to wane, though it was to be half a millennium before the night of scientific materialism fully set in. Today it is possible that we are witnessing the faint dawn of a new age of faith. One sign of this is the increasing interest in such books as *The*

Cloud of Unknowing. The author speaks of three stages, all necessary, on the upward path. The first is active works of mercy: here man is below himself; the second is mental prayer or meditation: here man is equal with himself; the third is the contemplation of God: here man is above himself. Perhaps Occidental man, who in the last five hundred years has sunk from aspirations toward a life above himself to materialistic ends that are below himself, is now ready to reverse the process.

The present interest in those books of devotion which concern what our author calls "the highest willable thing" does not arise from an academic curiosity about the nature of mysticism or the psychology of religion. It exists rather because those books meet a desperate need of the modern soul that is beginning to feel acutely its

lack of self-sufficiency. The magnificent structures reared by science are no longer felt to be a fit home for the human spirit. Man is discovering again that the clear cut and definite, the logical and consistent, cannot wholly satisfy him. His yearning for the paradoxical, the ultimate, the perfect, the infinite, leads him to step out over the edge of the world into dark mysterious depths beyond. The "cloud of unknowing" between God and man exists both because of human ignorance and of Divine incomprehensibility, but it can be pierced.

Many today are sensing the insufficiency of ordinary human reason. Among these are the Neo-Calvinists who give us a theology that reduces man to helplessness and denies all hope of perfection and unity with God in this life. The psychoanalysts are also aware that the cure for man's

disorder does not lie within the domain of reason, but they can go little further than a diagnosis of disease. They can do only partially and with less powerful words and symbols what prophets and priests have been doing through the ages. Others have found strength and comfort in the religions of the East that not only say God can be found, but give explicit directions for finding Him. However, the end result in most cases is an absorption in the Absolute that destroys all human individuality.

For the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, God is reached and the dark cloud pierced by divine love, the highest form of knowledge. Reason is simplified, not left behind. The creature is not reduced to helplessness, for man must reach toward God if God is to reach toward him. Such Christian love does not lead to

self-annihilation though it does lead to self-forgetfulness. "And yet in all this sorrow he desireth not to un-be—but to lack the knowing and the feeling of his being" (Chapter 44). Nor yet does it lead men away from the world. "Who so had this work it should govern him full seemly as well in body as in soul . . . each good man that saw him should be fair and joyful to have him in company . . . he should know full well how to make himself like unto all that conversed with him whether they were customary sinners or none—his countenance and his words should be full of ghostly wisdom, full of fire and of fruit" (Chapter 54). Such illogical but practical combination of this world and the other, of the human and the divine, of the finite and the infinite, typified in the Incarnation, is a thoroughly Christian solution that fits in with the practical temper of our present time.

The interpretation of *The Cloud of Unknowing* that follows was written at Pendle Hill by a student member of the community who, like the author interpreted, prefers to remain anonymous. It is published in the hope that it will introduce others as it has already introduced Pendle Hill to a great devotional classic. We are happy to be associated in the publication with Harper & Brothers, who have already performed an important service in bringing literature of this kind to the attention and within reach of the public.

HOWARD H. BRINTON

Pendle Hill
Wallingford, Pennsylvania

PREFACE

This version of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is not a paraphrase, nor a modern translation; it is not suggested as a short cut to understanding the original text, nor is it a substitute for reading the book itself. It is simply an interpretation made by a reader, who for several years has been turning to it for guidance and who has found in this fourteenth century devotional classic, written by an anonymous monk to an anonymous pupil, fruitful and practical assistance in the art of prayer.

As a traveler stops sometimes to catch the view before him at a given moment,

and as he holds it so to speak in a frame, realizing that it is not the only view nor the final one, just so have I set down my view of *The Cloud of Unknowing,* as it appears at this stage of the spiritual journey. I offer it as it stands to other workers in the life of prayer.

This conception of *The Cloud of Unknowing* has evolved out of a personal need to crystallize its teachings, to probe its meanings, to outline its psychology and to set down the exercises by which "the soul is oned with God." Those that are familiar with these lines and value them as they stand can understand with what reverence and reluctance I have altered words and rearranged sections for the sake of clarity.

However, as I read and reread, wrote and rewrote the words of this zealous monk, there came an eagerness and zest in

the work that enabled me to reproduce some of his directness and simplicity, and even a flavor of the Anglo-Saxon can be found in the present work. This is true because many of the old words are unchanged, since they said so perfectly what no counterpart in modern speech could say. "No more perfect cause to be *meeked* under" conveys to me an active process entailing patience under trials, long-suffering, gentleness and "willing to will the will of God" as Dom John Chapman states it; all this rather than the passive and possible self-conscious lowliness that "being humbled" suggests. Or—"could she *unfeel* the deep sorrow of her heart," expresses perfectly a state no modern word conveys.

On the other hand, words that were alive in the experience of our author have since been defined, killed and perfectly preserved in the technical vocabulary of

professional theologians. Hence they no longer "speak to the condition" of a seeking soul. In order to read any devotional classic with understanding one must unbury and resurrect these key words. The search for their unfolding truth requires patience, because if they are truly alive they are changing, growing and developing and the "safe" final meaning is not captured. Consider, for example, this little word *sin*. On seeing it first this sinner sees all his own particular acts of personal disobedience to the highest law he knows. Then the longing prayer to love God with all one's being brings me to know and feel that this *sin* is self-separation from God. Then I know, but do not yet feel, that the "lump of self" is *sin*—this egocentered consciousness strangulated from the God-consciousness for which it was created. It becomes the whole nature of humanity apart from God. Hence to this

interpreter selfness means sin and sin, selfness. The terms are used interchangeably as they best appear to accord with the teaching of the monk.

I have found it convenient to bring together related matters under four topics, none of which is isolated, however, and their arrangement around these topics does not in any way invalidate the author's caution that the whole must be read. Each part is dependent on every other part, and none is complete in itself. These sections are: (1) One-pointed Prayer: the process by which the contemplative becomes "oned with God"; (2) The Active and Contemplative Lives: his relationship to the world in which he lives; (3) Growth in Virtue: as it relates to the life of prayer, (4) The Inner Man: how he is altered or the system of psychology underlying the process of integration.

Our author is systematic and has no

doubt as to where he is headed in his book on contemplation. However, he presents his material much in the same way as a modern college professor lectures to his classes. At times he leaves matters hanging while he goes back for the sake of emphasis to points already made in former discussions, and at other times he is caught in critical discussions of the work of his contemporaries in contemplation. I have omitted these portions. Our text contains fifty-two of the seventy-five chapters. In rearranging this material I have inserted transitional and explanatory sentences enclosed in brackets. The numbers in parentheses indicate passages of *The Cloud of Unknowing* that I have included in this interpretation.

The unknownness of this monk is in name only, for his readers soon feel that he has an intimate knowledge of their

spiritual state and that he speaks to it as directly as though he were a member of the same religious society, or a minister, or a priest, or possibly a counseling psychiatrist.

Here is a trumpet call to the life of the spirit. There is great energy and athleticism of will to press on to full wholeness of soul, and finally to oneness with God Himself. "Go on now—let's see how you do!" "Lift up the foot of thy love and step toward that state called Perfect." "Pierce the Cloud of Unknowing with a sharp dart of lovely longing," do it "stalwartly and listily," "hammer at it," "strive" and "struggle." With all this eagerness and this driving of the will to God Himself Alone, the monk never lets the worker forget that his efforts are fruitless unless they spring from the grace of God Himself. This singleness of will and the

creative power that accompanies it are nothing if not the pure gift of God out of love for His sinning creatures, each one individually.

Otherwise what barrenness and bleakness there would be in the hard discipline that initiates the inquiring soul into this work, what pain and discouragement apart from God, unsoftened for the seeking soul. The master lessens none of this for his seeking pupil, though ever beside it he puts the power of grace and the warmth of a magnetic love.

One cannot escape here the beautiful harmony between God's giving grace and man's longing love. The recurring response of grace to the pulsing prayer of the soul is the rhythm by which the worker moves forward to wholeness. The unfolding evolution of life is based on the hidden seed, that like the acorn lying unalive in the

darkness of earth is drawn on to its fulfill ment by forces quite other than itself. Both drawn from without and stirring within, it becomes the oak, rooted in earth while stretching to heaven. This invasion of the temporal by the eternal is grace, the initiator and inspirer, the guide throughout the process. This grace is the power of God by which the individual becomes conscious of his God-hunger and by which he is led on to its satisfaction.

"By love he may be gotten and holden but by the intellect never" is a theme repeated in varying forms throughout the book. Over and over he says the highest experience of man is not an exercise of the intellect, rather it is by an unceasing, loving desire of the will that man transcends himself. "If it is to be perfect all intellectual operations must be left behind and the whole apex of affection transferred

and transformed into God."[1] Because this contention of the mystics is often misunderstood, they are said to have cast aside the God-given faculty of reason. Therefore the system of psychology set forth in the latter chapters is extremely valuable. Here is found a nice discrimination of faculties and the function of each is indicated as a servant to this highest duty of the creature in relation to his Creator. The intellect has no small role to play. The parallelism between this fourteenth century psychology and modern psychology is evident: "No matter how beautiful and perfect a man may believe his reason to be, he can always be certain that it is only one of the possible mental functions, and covers only one aspect of the phenomena of life which corresponds to it. There lies on every hand

[1] *The Soul's Progress in God*, Bonaventura. World's Devotional Classics, vol. III, p. 65.

the irrational, that which does not fit in with reason . . . one must not identify himself with reason, because a man is not and cannot be wholly rational, nor will he ever become so."[2]

I do have a concern that the charge of the author, as it is stated in the introduction, is not violated and as one introducing this book to new readers, I would press upon them the same charge in the same spirit of love. This book is intended for all whose intention is to grow by grace to the true fulfillment of their being. It is not intended as a guidebook for beginners in the life of prayer, but is for those who have been drawn on by "a leash of lovely longing" to that point in the growth of their souls toward God where they are leaving the active prayer of the intellect

[2] *Two Essays on Psychoanalysis,* Carl G. Jung.

and are coming into contemplation—or to the place where inner prayer is simplified to a single direction of the will without any work of the imagination or understanding. By interior prayer is meant direction of the will and growth of the soul toward God, culminating in final oneness with Him.

Behind the anonymity of the fourteenth century monk who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* is the anonymity of his fifth century predecessor in the Via Negativa, the monk who wrote the *Mystical Theology*, ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite. For more than four hundred years his work was little known until the Irish scholar John Scotus Erigena used it as the basis for his opposition to the concretism in religious thought of his day. This descendant of the *Mystical Theology* may be useful in meeting similar tendencies of the present time.

Five editions and two paraphrases of *The Cloud of Unknowing* have appeared within the last hundred years. I have used the following in preparing this treatise:

Early English Text Society, Original Series 218. Edited by Phyllis Hodgson. London, 1944. Evelyn Underhill. Edited from B. M. Hail 674. London, 1912. Dom Justin McCann. London, 1924.

I

Introduction to the Text

"Here beginneth a book of contemplation, the which is called the Cloud of Unknowing, in the which a Soul is Oned with God."

✠

HOEVER YOU ARE WHO POSSESS THIS book in any way—whether you own it, or have borrowed it, or simply carry it for another—I charge you by a vow of love, that you will not willfully read it, nor write it, nor speak it, nor even permit it to be read, written or spoken by anyone else, nor to any other person, except by one whose purpose, in your judgment, is to become a perfect follower of Christ. By that I do not mean a person who is devoted only to deeds of mercy, but one whose purpose is to come to the pure contemplation of God, or to the most sovereign point that it is possible for him to come to in this temporal life. He should be one who does all he can to help himself on in this life by a faithful heeding of moral and spiritual disciplines

and has been doing so for a long time.

By this same vow of love, I charge you that if any such do read it, write it, or speak it, or hear it read or spoken, that you will charge them as I do you, to take time to read, write, speak or hear the whole book; for there are some matters in the beginning or middle part that are left hanging, and yet are taken up later, and if a man saw only one part and not the other he might easily be led into error. That you and others may avoid this error I charge you to do as I tell you for love's sake.

As for worldly chatterers, self-praisers and blamers, tale-bearers, gossipers, and all kinds of faultfinders, I do not care if they ever see this book. It is not my intention to write such a book for them, and it is better that they do not meddle with this one. I would say the same also to all curiosity seekers, whether they be learned

or unlearned. It may be that they are good men in their daily lives, but a work on contemplative prayer could mean little to them. This is not true of those who remain outwardly active in the world, but are nevertheless drawn to a life of contemplation through an inner longing for God, whose own Spirit calls them, and whose laws are beyond their present comprehension. These men are not continually aware of this inclination of their souls (as is the case of true contemplatives) but now and then they do partake of a true oneness with God. If such men were to see these words they would be greatly strengthened by them through the grace of God.

The last chapter of this book contains some points by which one may find sure proof whether he is called by God to pursue this way or not (Prologue).

TO HIM FOR WHOM THIS WORK WAS WRITTEN

My Spiritual Friend in God

I beseech you to give diligent heed to the nature of your calling and the way by which it guides you. With all your heart give thanks to God, for it is by His grace that you may stand steadfast against the subtle assaults of your inner and outer enemies, both of which would turn you from your true path.

If you do this you will win the crown of life that is everlasting.

[The teachings of an unknown monk of the fourteenth century are here gathered together. They are directed to a young man of twenty-four years of age, who had been living an ordinary Christian life in the world when he felt the

upward pull of Divine Love. He no longer could remain contented with his former way of life and found it necessary to take upon himself certain religious vows, even while living in the world with fellow Christians. The everlasting love of God Himself still pursued him and he went on another step, forsaking his former employment in the world and beginning to live as a sort of servant in a religious order. However, God continued to kindle his desire and fastening it "by a leash of lovely longing" led him on to a more special way of life, so that he had more opportunity to devote himself entirely to this call of his soul.]

[The text begins here.] And what more? Even here it seems that God would not leave you easily, because of the love that He has ever had in His heart for you.

What did He do? See with how much grace and gentleness He has ever drawn you on as one for whom He longs, so that you have come to your present degree of Christian living. It is in this solitary state of soul that you may learn to lift up the foot of love and step toward that state called PERFECT—the last state of all (1).

Look, you miserable creature, wrapped up in your own earthly desires, see what you are! What are you and why do you deserve to be stirred by our Lord to seek Him? Would not any weary wretch asleep in his own selfness, be awakened by the drawing of such a love, and the voice of such a calling? It is now that you must be watchful lest your enemies, self-pride and idol worship, separate you from God; don't look upon yourself as either holier or better because of the worthiness of your calling and for the unusual way you

live because of it. Rather think yourself all the more miserable and accursed unless you seek busily for the truth within and live according to that truth, as it comes to you by the grace of God and your spiritual teachers.

To the degree that you do this will you become more obedient and loving to the Spirit of God within you, because He the Almighty God, King of kings, Lord of lords, lowered Himself meekly to your stature so that you might be able to receive Him.

Go to work earnestly then, I beseech you. Look forward now, and let the past be. Behold what you lack and not what you have, for this is the most immediate way to get and keep meekness. All your life now you must stand in desire for God, if you would go forward to perfection. This desire must always be formed in

your will by the hand of the Almighty God into whose possession you have now given it over. One thing I tell you, He is a jealous lover and will permit no fellowship and He will not kindle your desire unless He alone can work within your will. He asks no other help than your own willingness. He wills that you but gaze upon Him and abandon yourself to Him. Keep the windows and doors of your soul against the assailing of outer and inner distractions, both of which hinder His work. If you will do this, you need only reach out to Him meekly with a prayer of love and He will soon help you.

Begin then, let me see how you do! He is indeed ready and only waits for you. What shall you do, and how shall you get on (2)?

II

One-Pointed Prayer

"Naked intent of the soul"

God,
Unto whom all hearts are open,
Unto whom all will is spoken,
Unto whom nothing is hidden:
I beseech Thee
To cleanse the intent of my heart
With the unspeakable gift of Thy grace
That I may perfectly love Thee
And worthily praise Thee.
Amen.

✣

1. DEGREES OF CHRISTIAN MEN'S LIVING

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF LIFE IN the spirit: one is the active life and the other is the contemplative life. Active life is lower, and contemplative life is higher. Active life has two degrees, a higher and a lower; and the contemplative life also has two degrees, a lower and a higher. These two lives are so coupled together, that although they differ in part, neither of them can be had fully without some part of the other, because that part which is the higher part of the active life, is the same as the lower part of the contemplative life. So a man may not be completely active unless he is in part contemplative; nor can he be fully

contemplative (as it is possible to be here in this mortal body) unless he is in part active. The condition of the active life is such that it is both begun and ended in this life. This is not so of the contemplative life, it is begun in this life and it shall last forever and ever. That part which Mary chose shall never be taken away from her. Active life is troubled and labors hard with many things, but the contemplative life sits in peace with one thing.

The lower part of the active life consists in good and honest deeds of mercy and charity. The higher part of the active life and the lower part of the contemplative life lie in good spiritual meditation—many reflections on the wretchedness of man, and with much sorrow and repentance because of it; thinking often of the suffering love of Christ, seeking to enter

into his passion as one is able; joyous thanksgiving and praise for the wonderful gifts and kindnesses of God and all His holy creatures. But the higher part of the contemplative life (as it may be had in this life) rests wholly within the darkness and this Cloud of Unknowing, with a longing love for God alone and pure contemplation of Him.

In the lower part of the active life a man is outside of himself and beneath himself [he reaches out and stoops down to the physical needs of his fellow Christians with materials quite other than himself]. In the higher part of the active life and the lower part of the contemplative life a man is within himself and even with himself [looking within he knows the common substance of mankind]. In the higher part of the contemplative life he is above himself and under his God [God

the Creator and abiding in His creature is always above him]. He is above himself because his purpose is to go by grace where he cannot go by his own human nature. Here he is knit to God in spirit—in oneness of love and harmony of will. Although we do not understand this, it is true that a man cannot come to the higher degree of active life unless he cease from the activity of the lower degree for a time—just so it is impossible for a man to come to the higher degree of contemplative life unless he cease for a time from meditation. For he knows that it is both unnatural and a hindrance for him if he were meditating to give his attention to the outer affairs of his life either those in which he has been working or had been planning to work. It is just as unnatural and would hinder him just as much if he were considering and meditating on any

of God's wonderful gifts, His kindness and the kindnesses of those knit to Him by love. In this manner he would be letting them stand between him and his God when he should be at work in this darkness and Cloud of Unknowing with an eager directing of his love toward God Himself; even though his thoughts were ever so holy, pleasing and strengthening (8).

[First, before I tell you more of this contemplative prayer] I will tell you who should begin to work in this prayer and when and how and with what carefulness he should work.

If you ask me who shall work, I answer: all who have sincerely turned from their worldly lives and occupation with an active life, even though it be a life of good works, to a contemplative life where they direct their wills to God for Himself

alone. All these should undertake this work by grace whoever they be—whether they have been sinners or not (27).

If you ask me when they shall work in contemplative prayer, then I will answer: not until they have cleansed their consciences of all their special deeds of sin according to the teaching and ordinances of the church.

For in this work of contemplation a soul preserves within itself the root and ground of self-love which remains within it even after the confession of former sins no matter how enraptured it may become. Therefore, whoever would labor in this work let him first cleanse his conscience, then afterward when he has done all he rightfully can to make amends, he may with safety give himself boldly, though meekly, to the life of pure contemplation. And he may be sure that he has been kept

from it quite long enough. For this is the work in which a man's soul should have been occupied all his lifetime had he never separated himself from God.

As long as his soul dwells in this temporal body man shall ever see and feel this cumbrous Cloud of Unknowing between him and his God. Not only does he see and feel this darkness but he shall also see and feel something of all the creatures God has ever made and something of their works pressing in upon his mind between him and his God. [Man has suffered this frustration of his soul's true desire ever since he first turned from the love of God to the love of creatures.] (28).

Therefore if man would come to the cleanness that he lost through sin, and come to the fullness of life where all woe is wanting, he must patiently travail in this work and endure the pain thereof,

whether he himself has sinned much or little (29).

From the time that you feel that you have done all that you are able to do to amend for your sins, according to the teachings of the Church, then set yourself at once to this work. After that if it seems that all your particular sins press in your mind between you and your God, or there are new stirrings to sin, you shall always step over them stalwartly, treading them down steadfastly underfoot, with the fervency of your longing for God. If they arise often, put them down often; to say it briefly, as often as they arise as often put them down. And if you think the struggle is great, you may find ways and individual devices for putting them aside; the exercises are better learned by experience from God than from any man in this life (31).

2. PRELIMINARY FORMS OF MENTAL PRAYER

There are many exercises in which a contemplative apprentice will engage before he comes to this prayer of single intent. These are Lesson, Meditation and Orison; or as you understand them—reading, thinking and praying. You can find these three written of in another book by another man in a much better way than I can explain them—therefore I will not tell you of them here. This I tell you, however, these three are so coupled together, that for those who are beginners, or who are growing in the life of the spirit [not those already contemplatives], thinking cannot be had without reading, or hearing coming first. Reading and hearing are one . . . prayer cannot be readily had unless there is meditation first.

God's word whether written or spoken is like a mirror. Spiritually the eye of your soul is your reason; your conscience is your spiritual face. If you wanted to see whether there were a dirty spot on your face, you could not find out where it was unless you had a mirror, or the word of another, or the teaching of another. Without reading or hearing the word of God it is impossible for a man to understand his own state, because always looking upon earthly things he is blinded so that he is unable to see the dirty spots on his own conscience. It is only when a man discovers where the dirty spot is that he can run to the well and wash it.

You see meditation cannot be had by beginners working in this work without reading and hearing coming first, nor can praying come without meditation. However, in your present state I do not care

that you have any such meditations (35). [I say this because now your soul must leave off vocal prayers and meditations, no matter how helpful and good they may have been. These are just such a hindrance as are the former exercises to the boy that plays a game. First, he studies the purpose of the play, learns the rules, practices the exercises, but when he enters the game itself he fixes his desire upon the goal and forgets his former busyness with rules. At the beginning he plays fitfully, but before he knows he is lost in the game and cannot turn back.]

Lift up your heart unto God then with a meek longing love, let there be but a naked intent unto God alone, and not to anything that He has made. See to it that you struggle on against anything except God Himself, so that no other thought dwells in your mind or moves your will

but Himself. Do all that you are able to forget all creatures that God has ever made, and all their works, so that your thoughts and desires are not directed and stretched to any of them in general or in particular. Let them be with the sort of heedlessness that they deserve.

It is this work of your soul that pleases God most. All the saints and powers of light that have ever lived rejoice in this work and hasten to help with it with all their strength. All the powers of darkness are angered when your desires are directed toward God and they try to defeat you in every way that they can. All men living on earth are wonderfully helped by this work, you do not know how. Even the souls that are suffering from the fruits of their own sins are suffering less because of your work. No other work will cleanse nor strengthen you so much as this. Yet

it is the easiest work of all when the soul is made aware by grace of its true thirst for God and it is the soonest done. Otherwise it is hard and beyond human strength to do.

Cease not, therefore, but labor on in this work until you feel this hunger for God alone. The first time that you try you will find only a darkness, as though it were a Cloud of Unknowing, which you do not understand, only that you feel in your will a naked intent unto God. Whatever you do, this darkness and this Cloud is between you and your God, and keeps you back so that you may not see Him either by the reasoning of your intellect or feel Him in the affection of your heart. Therefore you will have no other course than to stay in this darkness in the best spirit that you can, always calling upon Him whom you desire. For if ever you are

to see Him or feel Him (to the degree that it is possible here), it must always be in this Cloud and in this darkness. If you will continually struggle as I bid you, I trust that in His mercy you shall come to His love (3).

Do not think because I call it a darkness or a cloud, that it is any cloud congealed out of the clouds that fly in the air, or any darkness such as is in your house when the candle is out. Such a cloud and such a darkness one can create out of the imagination and carry before him on the lightest day of summer, and also in the darkest winter one can imagine a clear shining light. Leave such false images alone. I do not mean such—for when I say darkness, I mean a lack of knowing, such as those things that you do not know or have forgotten are in the darkness. In your present state you are not able to see with your

spiritual eye. It is for this reason that it is not called a cloud of air, but a Cloud of Unknowing that is between you and your God.

3. CO-OPERATION BETWEEN MAN'S EFFORT AND GOD'S GRACE

[It is marvelous, this meeting of God and the soul of man!] See, how He fits Himself to each soul, measuring Himself to its capacity and how each soul is worthy to meet Him because within it is the image and likeness of the Creator Himself! He by Himself without more and none but He is sufficient to fill and more than fill the will and desire of each soul; and each soul because of His re-forming grace, is sufficient to its fullness to comprehend Him by love, who is incomprehensible to the reasoning powers. For the reason of

man cannot comprehend Him any more than it can comprehend its own soul or the soul of any other.

Yet understand this—each reasoning creature has within him two active faculties—the power of comprehending by knowing, or the mind, and the power of comprehending by love, or the heart. By the first of these two powers, the knowing power or the mind, God is ever incomprehensible, even though He created it; but to the loving power or the heart, He is ever more comprehensible to the capacity of each soul to receive Him. Hence it is that each loving soul, by itself because of the love implanted by God, may comprehend Him who is sufficient to satisfy all longing and more than satisfy beyond any limit; indeed, is sufficient to fulfill all the longings of all the souls that ever were. This is the endless, marvelous miracle of

love, the working of which shall never end—forever shall He do it, and never shall He cease to do it.

Behold this miracle—for whosoever will may see it by grace. Feeling this love is the fullness of life without end, and not feeling it is death without end.

Therefore any creature, re-formed by grace so that he is as whole as he was before he chose to love and obey creatures rather than to love and obey God, will be continually aware of the true hunger of his soul just as he is aware of the natural hungers of his body. Then it is that God satisfies his hunger with the endless joy of His Presence. Man could not continue in such a state of joy unless his longings were fully satisfied. Therefore, do not wonder that I urge you on in this work. This is the work in which man's soul would have been engaged had he never turned from

obeying God. For this work was he made and all things were made to help him and further him in it. It is by this work that he shall be made whole again, and for lack of it he falls deeper and deeper into self-love and further and further from God-love. If he will evermore give heed and labor to this work he will come to feel this loving longing and so will rise higher and higher from sin and nearer and nearer to God.

[These impulses of the soul rise in as little time as man can reckon and are as continuous as the flowing of one moment after another.] Therefore take heed how you spend your time for there is nothing more precious than time—in one such little time this high awareness of God may be lost or won. As a token of the preciousness of time, it is good to think of the manner in which God gives it to man—

He never gives two times at once but one after another, because He would not reverse the order of the appointed course in the affairs of His creation. Time was made for man and not man for time. Therefore, God who is the ruler of all nature would not move before the desire of man's own soul. [It is in this manner that God's grace answers man's desiring, and the number of impulses within his soul harmonizes with the times His grace is offered.] . . . Give heed to these stirrings within your soul—for as you heed them God satisfies your asking. This is the time you must give account of and you will have no excuse against God saying, "Thou givest two times at once, and I had but one stirring at once."

Now you say sorrowfully, "What shall I do? How shall I give account of all this time—I who am twenty-four years of age

and have never yet heeded these gifts of God. How shall I redeem this time? . . . I am truly bewildered. Help me for the love of Jesus!"

It is good that you have said "for the love of Jesus." For in the love of Jesus shall be your help. Love has the power to make all things shared. Therefore love Jesus and all that He has is yours—knit yourself to Him, both by love and by faith, for by the strength of such a knot, you shall become a common partaker with Him and with all others who are knitted to Him by love . . .

Lo, here is strength! Understand it wisely and pick profit from it.

Of one thing I warn you, I do not see how you can justly claim such fellowship with Jesus and all those holy ones who have fellowship with Him through love, unless you have done all that you can of

yourself to observe these stirrings within your soul in order that you may be seen to be profitable to the fellowship, just as they are to you; although your work may be very little.

Take heed to this work, and to the marvelous way of it within your soul. If it be wisely understood it is but a sudden stirring within your soul, springing up without your willing, just as the spark of itself leaps up from the coal. It is marvelous how many of these sudden stirrings may come within an hour to one who is given to this work. In one such moment the soul suddenly and fully forgets all created things. Yet immediately after each uplifting it falls down again because of its attachment to an earthbound body. [The soul lies between time and eternity. With its upper part it touches Eternity and with its lower part it touches

Time.] Hence it is ever falling down again to some thought or to some deed it has done or left undone. What does it matter? For immediately after it rises up again as suddenly as it did before (4).

4. BEGINNING PROCESS OF INTROVERSION

If ever you are to come to this Cloud and abide in it and work in it, as I have urged you to do, you must, since this Cloud of Unknowing is above you, between you and your God, place a Cloud of Forgetting beneath you, between yourself and all creatures that have ever been made. Perhaps you think you are very far from God because of this Cloud of Unknowing that is between you and your God, but if you consider it aright you will see that you are much further from Him

when you have no Cloud of Forgetting between you and all the creatures that have ever been made, and all their works and conditions. All things, I tell you, are to be hidden under the Cloud of Forgetting in this work. When the eye of the soul is fixed on its mark, as the eye of the shooter is upon the target, that upon which it gazes is beheld in a celestial light. So whatever it is upon which you center your loving desire, that creature or thing will stand between you and your God. Then you are further from Him than when your mind is empty of all else save Him for whom you long.

It is for this reason that I say all should be hidden under the Cloud of Forgetting. Although it be good to think upon the kindness of God, and to love Him and praise Him for it; yet it is far better to gaze upon the pure essence of Him and

to love Him and praise Him for Himself (5).

And now you ask, "How shall I think of Him. What is He?"

To this I have no answer except to say, "I do not know."

For with this question you have brought me to that same darkness and to that same Cloud of Unknowing in which I wish that you were yourself. Man through grace can have full knowledge of all other creatures and their works, and even of the works of God Himself; and can reason about them aright, but of God can no man think. Therefore I would leave all the things about which I can think and choose to love that about which I cannot, because He may be fully loved who cannot be defined at all. By the affection He may be secured and kept, but by the thought never. Therefore, while it may be good to

think about the kindness and goodness of God on certain occasions, for in these thoughts there are both enlightenment and nurture for the soul yet when the soul is stirred to a one-pointed desire for God, these meditations should be given up and covered over with a Cloud of Forgetting. Step above them firmly and stalwartly and with a devoted and determined directing of your will to God, set yourself to pierce that darkness above you. Strike upon that thick Cloud of Unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love—and do not leave it no matter what happens (6).

If any thought arise and persist between you and this darkness and ask you, "What are you looking for, what do you want?" say, "It is God I covet, Him I desire, Him I seek, and nothing but Him."

If he ask you, "What is that God?" you say, "It is the God who created me, whose

love claimed me and whose grace called me to this state and in it you have no skill —go down!" Then tread him down vigorously with a prayer of love, even though he seems to you to be very pure and able to help you in your seeking. It is true that he perhaps will bring to your mind many consoling and wonderful memories of the kindnesses of God, saying—He is altogether lovely and loving, altogether gracious and merciful. If you will listen to him (and he desires nothing better) he will continue to chatter more and more, until he has brought you lower and lower to the place where he wishes you to be.

This is the manner of his workings—first, he will let you look on the wonderful kindnesses of God—then he will bring you to look on your old wretched life, and perhaps in seeing and thinking of it, he will bring your mind to some place where

you have lived before. Then at last, even before you are aware of it, you are scattered you know not where. The cause of this scattering is—that at first you willfully listened to your thoughts, then you answered them, then you received them and then you let them have their way with you—giving yourself over fully to revery.

Nevertheless the things that he said at first were good and holy, so holy that any man or woman who thinks he can come to contemplation without many such profitable meditations beforehand on his own wretchedness apart from God, on the suffering love of Christ, on the kindness and great goodness and worthiness of God, surely he shall err and fail in his purpose. Yet any man or woman who has practiced such meditations for a long time, must leave them and place them under

a Cloud of Forgetting and keep them there, if he is ever to pierce the Cloud of Unknowing between him and his God.

When you are certain that you have been called to this work by grace and have set yourself to it, lift up your heart with a humble longing love. Make your sole intention to God who created you and by His love claimed you, and graciously called you on to this degree of Christian living. Receive no other thought of Him, even not all of these unless you desire to have them. For a naked intent directed to God without any further cause than Himself fully suffices.

If you desire to have this intent wrapped and enfolded in one word, so that you may have a better hold on it, take but one little word of one syllable, for one is better than two; the shorter the word, the better it harmonizes with the

work of the spirit. Such a word is this word GOD or this word LOVE. Choose whichever you will, or another if you like; whatever word you like best of one syllable. Fasten this word to your heart, so that it may never go from you for anything that happens.

This word shall be your shield and spear, whether you ride in peace or in war. With this word you shall beat on this Cloud and this darkness above you. With this word you shall smite down all manner of thought under the Cloud of Forgetting. So much so that if any thought presses upon you to ask you what you long for, answer with no more words than this one word. If out of his great scholarship he wants to explain the word and take it apart for you, tell him that you will have it whole and not have it all broken up. If you will hold firmly to this

purpose you may be sure that the thought will not remain long. And why? Surely because you will not let him feed on such pleasant meditations as he did before (7).

[This blind beholding or pure contemplation reveals in a glorified light all upon which it gazes. It is for this reason] your understanding will seem to be pressing in upon you when you set yourself to this work. Still, I say, it must always be borne down; and unless you bear it down it will bear you down. So much so that when you consider yourself abiding best in this darkness and think you have nothing on your mind but God Himself, if you will observe the true case you will find that your mind is not occupied in this darkness, but is considering something lower than God. If this is true, surely then that thing is above you for the time and is between you and your God. Therefore make it your purpose to put down such

considerations, be they ever so holy and pleasing.

One thing I tell you—that a pure intention of love unto God for Himself alone, and every hidden setting upon this Cloud of Unknowing, is more profitable to the health of your soul, more worthy in itself and more pleasing to God and all His holy creatures now and forevermore, yea and more helpful to all your friends, worldly and spiritual, mortal and immortal, than if the eye of your soul were opened in contemplation so that you had a vision of all the angels and saints in God's Presence, or heard the joy and the very melody of their praise.

Have no wonder at this for once you see the pure love of God, as clearly as is possible through God's grace, so that you can touch it, and feel it just as you do those things of this sensible life, you would think as I do. You may be sure that such

pure vision will not come to man for long in this mortal life, but a feeling of it may be had through grace when God permits it. Therefore, lift up your love to that cloud. Or rather I put it more truly when I say, let God draw your love up to that cloud. Strive through the help of His grace to forget all other things.

If a single thought on a thing less than God coming against your will and knowledge puts you further from Him and hinders you and makes you less able to experience the fullness of His love, how much more so, do you think, will a subject for meditation chosen by your own will hinder you in your purpose? If thinking about any special saint or any purely spiritual matter will hinder you so much, how much do you think will consideration of any man living in this wretched life, or any mortal or worldly thing hinder you?

I am not saying that a single sudden thought concerning good, pure and spiritual affairs, coming against your will and knowledge, or even if chosen for the purpose of increasing your devotion, even though it be a hindrance to this pure beholding of God, is therefore evil. No, God forbid that you should so understand it. I do say, however, that although it be good and holy, yet in this work it hinders more than it profits, at the time that one is at work in this work. He who gives himself to seeking God Himself cannot find final rest in any of his messengers (9)!

5. NATURAL WORDS OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

The meditations of those who are called by grace to this work come suddenly without any previous meditation. It is in this

manner that the words of their prayers arise . . . if they are words, as they seldom are, then they are very few words; and the fewer the better. If it be a little word of one syllable, I think it is better than a word of two syllables, and more in harmony with the work of the spirit. A spiritual worker in contemplation should ever pray from the innermost and supreme depth of his spirit. The truth of this may be seen in the cry of human need. A man or a woman, frightened by a sudden danger of fire, or of death, or whatever else that comes is driven in haste to the height of his spirit and needs to cry or pray for help. How does he cry? Surely not in many words, nor yet in one word of two syllables. Why is that? Surely it is because longer words take too long a time to make plain the urgency of his need and the desperateness of his spirit.

He bursts out with fright in the depths of his spirit and cries out only one little word of one syllable: such a word as this word FIRE, or this word OUT. Just as this little word FIRE stirs and pierces more quickly the ears of his hearers, so does this little word of one syllable pierce the darkness when it is not only cried and thought, but secretly meant in the depth of the spirit, which is the height of the spirit. For in spiritual language all is one, height and depth, length and breadth. It pierces the ears of the Almighty God, quicker than any long psalter unmindfully mumbled in the teeth. Therefore it is written that the short prayer pierces heaven (37).

Why does it pierce heaven, this little short prayer of one syllable? Surely because he who prays it cries in the urgency of his spirit, in its depths, in its height, in its length and in its breadth. The cry

is in the height of the spirit, for it is with all the power of the spirit; it is in the depth for in this little syllable is all the wisdom of the spirit; it is in the length for it is felt forever as it is felt now and so it would cry forever; it is in its breadth for it wills this same prayer for all that it wills for itself. If we read the words of St. Paul and the saints, we find that the soul in this prayer comprehends to its capacity what is the length, and the breadth, the height and the depth of the Everlasting and All-loving, the Almighty and All-knowing God. The everlastingness of God is His length; His love is His breadth; His might is His height and His wisdom is His depth. Is it any wonder that a soul so nearly shaped by grace to the very image and likeness of God, his maker, should be heard by God? Even though it has been a very sinful soul, and as it were

is an enemy to God, yet if it should by grace come to cry out such a prayer of one syllable in the height, and the depth, in the length and breadth of its spirit, it would always be heard and helped by God because of the greatness of its need and the persistent sound of its cry.

As an example—if you should hear him who is your mortal enemy cry in the height of his spirit this little word OUT—then without caring if he were your enemy, out of pity your heart would be stirred and raised up by the great desperateness of his cry and you would get up, even though it were a midwinter's night, and you would help him quench his fire, and you would quiet him and you would give him rest.

Oh, Lord, since man can be brought to show such mercy by grace and to have so much pity, what mercy shall God have for

the passionate prayer of the soul, a cry that is made and formed in the height and depth, in the length and breadth of spirit?

God has all by nature that man has by grace and much more. Surely then without comparison, He will have much more mercy since by nature a thing is nearer its essence than it can be by grace (37).

We must therefore pray in the height and the depth, in the length and the breadth of spirit. Not in many words but in a little word of one syllable.

What shall this word be? Surely it shall be the word best suited to the nature of prayer itself. Let us see what prayer is in itself, and then we may more clearly know what word is best suited to its nature. Prayer is itself nothing other than a devout intent of the soul directed to God for the getting of good and the removing

of evil. Since this is true, all evil may be enfolded in this word SIN, either in cause or in essence. Let us then when we pray intently for the removing of evil either say, or think, or mean evil, and use no other word than this little word SIN. If we would intently pray for the getting of good, let us cry either by word or thought or desire, nothing other than this word GOD. For God is all good, both by cause and by being.

Do not wonder why I set these two words before all others—for if I knew any shorter words, that so fully enfolded within themselves all good and all evil, as these words do, or if I had been led by God to take any other words, I would have taken them and left these—and so I charge you to do.

Do not study about these words, for by so doing you will not come to your pur-

pose, nor will you come nearer to God, for God is not gotten by study, but only by grace. Take no words for prayer, not even these two, unless you are moved of God to take them. However, if God move you to take them, I counsel you not to leave them. Their helpfulness lies in their shortness.

Although shortness of prayer is greatly commended here, that does not mean the oftenness of prayer is lessened. Prayer is made in the length of the spirit—so that it should never cease until it has gotten that for which it longs. As an example look on the frightened man or woman who never cease to cry OUT, or FIRE until he has gotten help in his distress (38).

Therefore labor steadfastly on for a while and beat upon this high Cloud of Unknowing—then you may rest afterward. Nevertheless travail shall he have

before this work becomes restful for him. Yes, surely an exceedingly great labor shall he have unless he has special grace from God. Otherwise he will need to practice for a long time.

But I ask you in what shall the struggle be? Surely it lies in treading down all thoughts of all creatures that God has ever made and holding them under the Cloud of Forgetting. In this is all his labor, for this is man's part of the work—with the help of grace. The other, the stirring of love, that is the work of God only. Therefore, keep steadfastly on with your work and I promise you He will not fail in His. Let me see how you do. Do you not see how He stands and waits for you? For shame! Struggle hard for a while and then you shall soon be released from the greatness and hardness of this labor. Although it is hard and straight in the beginning,

when you have no devotion, nevertheless afterward when you have devotion it shall be made as restful and easy for you as it was hard before. Then you will have little labor, or none—for God Himself will work within your soul. Not always, nor for a long time at once, but when He pleases and as He pleases. Then you will know what joy it is to let him have His will with you.

It may happen sometimes then that He will send out a beam of spiritual light that will pierce this Cloud of Unknowing that is between you and Him, and show you some of His hiddenness, which no man can describe. Then you shall feel all your affections afire with His love—far more than I can tell you of, or may, or will at this time. Of that work which belongs only to God, I dare not speak with my blabbering tongue. Yet of that work which belongs

to man, when he feels himself stirred and helped by grace, I like very well to tell you—for in this there is less peril (26).

Go on then in this way—fill your spirit with the meaning of the word SIN without any special regard for any certain sin, whether it is merely harmful or mortal; such as pride, anger, envy, covetousness sloth, gluttony, lust. What matters it to contemplatives what the sin is, or how great a sin it is? For all sins they think (I mean in this time of prayer) are alike great in themselves, when the least sin means separation from God and a hindrance to spiritual peace.

Feel sin a lump, you do not know what, but none other than yourself [*ego*]. Ever cry out with your whole spirit this one cry: SIN, SIN, SIN! OUT, OUT, OUT! I tell you this prayer coming from the depths of your soul is taught better by God through ex-

perience than from any man's teaching. This desire of the soul is best when it is pure spirit, without any special meditation or even the saying of the word; except on those rare occasions when the spirit overflows and cries out SIN, because the body and soul are so filled and burdened with sorrow for its sin.

You shall do the same with this little word GOD. Fill your soul with the spiritual meaning of it without any special regard for any of His works—whether they are good, better or best, physical or spiritual—or to any virtue that may be brought about in man's soul by grace; not considering whether it is meekness or charity or voluntary poverty. What matters this to contemplatives? All virtues they find and feel in God, for in Him is everything, both by cause and by being. They think that if they had God they would have all good; and

therefore they covet nothing with any special desire except the good God Himself. Go on then in this same way just as far as you are able by grace to go—and mean God wholly—and wholly God, so that nothing else is at work in your mind and will, but only God.

Because all the while you live within this world you must feel to some degree this foul stinking lump of sin, as it were oned with your very essence—your *self* is the sin—therefore shall you alternately cry these two words—SIN and GOD. This is your meaning: if you had God then you would lack sin; and if you were without sin—then you would have God (40).

Have a care that there is nothing at work in your mind or will but only God. Try to smite down all knowing and feeling of anything less than God, tread it all down, very far beneath this Cloud of

Forgetting. Because in this work you must know full well that you are to forget not only other creatures than yourself and their deeds, but you are also to forget yourself and your good deeds done for the sake of God. It is the state of the perfect lover that he not only loves that thing which he loves more than himself, but also to hate himself for sake of that which he loves . . .

Break down all knowing and feeling of every creature, but most constantly of yourself. For on the knowing and feeling of yourself hangs all the knowing and feeling of all other creatures; beside this love of self the love of other creatures is easily forgotten. No matter how busily you may set yourself to forget yourself you will find that when you have forgotten all other creatures and all their work—yes and all your own work—there still remains

between you and your God a clear knowing and feeling of your own existence, which must always be destroyed if you are to come in truth to perfection in this work (43).

6. EXERCISES OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Here are two exercises which may be helpful to a beginner in contemplation. Try them and see if they will not be of use to you.

When you find inner and outer distractions pressing in upon you when you would direct yourself to God alone, do everything you can to act as though you did not know they were there. Try to look as it were over their shoulders, seeking another thing—which is God hidden in a Cloud of Unknowing. If you do this, I

think that within a short time you will be eased of your labor. If this exercise is understood aright it is nothing other than a longing desire to see God, an effort to see Him and feel Him as much as one is able here in this life. Such a desire is charity and it always deserves to be helped.

Here is another exercise—try this one if you wish. When you feel that you cannot put down these thoughts, cower down under them as a captive, or a coward overcome in battle; and think that it is but folly to strive any longer with them; in this manner you yield yourself to God in the hands of your enemies; feel yourself overcome forever. Give special heed to this exercise for I think that in the trying of this one you should be able to melt all to water. If this exercise is truly conceived it is nothing other than a true knowing and

feeling of yourself as you are—a wretch and a filthy thing, far worse than nothing. This knowing and feeling is meekness. This meekness deserves to have God descend with all his powerfulness to avenge you of your enemies and to take you up tenderly—to dry your spiritual eyes as the father does those of his child who is on the point of perishing in the mouths of wild pigs or mad, biting bears (32).

If you ask me by what power you shall come to the work of contemplative prayer, I beseech Almighty God of His great grace and goodness to tell you Himself—it is the work of God only, specially worked within your own soul. Without God's grace no saint nor any other holy creature could conceive it or desire it. Yet He does not give this grace, nor this desire to any soul that is unable to receive it . . . whether he is a sinner or innocent. It is

neither given for innocence, nor withheld because of sin. Take heed of this for I said *withheld* not *withdrawn*. Beware of error here, for the nearer men touch the truth, the more wary they must be of error. My meaning is clear, if you cannot understand it, lay it aside until God comes and teaches you. Do this and you shall not be hurt . . .

If you were truly meek you would feel about this as I say, for God gives it freely without merit. The condition of this work is such that the desire itself enables the soul to have it and to feel it. No ableness will a soul have without it. The capacity for contemplation is one with the work itself, so that he who feels called to the work is able to work therein, and no one else. . . . So much as you will and desire this oneness, you have it and no more, nor no less. Yet it is not will, nor desire, but something you do not understand that

stirs you to will and desire you do not know what. Do not be troubled if you never know more than this, I pray you—but go on ever more and more, so that you are ever pressing on.

Let this power work within you and lead you wheresoever it will. Let it be the worker, and you be the one worked upon; do but look upon it and let it alone. Do not meddle with it as though you would help, lest you lose it all. Be the tree and let it be the carpenter; be the house and let it be the dweller within. Be blind and shear away all desire for knowing, for knowing will hinder you more than help you now. It is sufficient that you feel yourself stirred graciously by something you do not know what—except that this stirring considers nothing less than God Himself and that there is in your soul only this naked [pure] intent toward God (34).

III

Actives and Contemplatives

"Martha and Mary"

✠

IN THE GOSPEL OF ST. LUKE IT IS written that when our Lord was in the house of Martha her sister sat at His feet. In listening to His words she did not heed the busyness of her sister, although her busyness was both very good and righteous, for it was truly the first part of the active life; neither did she heed the preciousness of His body, nor the gentle voice, nor words that He spoke in her presence—this would have been better and more righteous than the first part for it is the second part of the active life and the first part of the contemplative life. All her desire was centered on the highest Truth of God hidden within Him—that is the Presence of God Himself within Him.

To this she attended with all the love of her heart. She would not turn away from

it for anything that she saw or heard spoken or done about her; she sat with perfect stillness and with a quiet and eager love set herself upon the Cloud of Unknowing between her and her God. One thing I tell you—there has never been a creature pure enough, nor ever shall be, so deeply lost in ecstasy and love of God that there is not always a high and marvelous Cloud of Unknowing between him and his God. It was in this Cloud of Unknowing that Mary was so busily occupied with her eager longing for God. For her this was the best and purest work of her soul. For it she would not turn aside for anything. So much was she held in this contemplation that when her sister Martha complained of her to our Lord and bade Him bid her sister rise and help her so she would not need to work and labor so hard by herself, Mary sat quite still and an-

swered not one word, nor showed any grumbling spirit toward her sister because she had complained of her. This is no wonder—for she had been so busy with another manner of work which Martha did not understand, that she did not have time to heed her sister nor to answer her complaint.

Take heed of this, friend, for all these works, these words and this behavior on the part of our Lord and the two sisters is set down as an example for all actives and contemplatives that have ever lived since the time of our Lord and ever will live. By Mary is understood all contemplatives; and they should pattern their lives after hers; and by Martha is understood all actives and actives should seek to follow her for the same reason (17).

Just as Martha complained of Mary her sister, just so today do all those living ac-

tive lives complain of contemplatives. This is a common complaint of all peoples of the world whether they be religious or secular—there is none excepted. Whenever anyone feels himself moved by grace and the advice of spiritual teachers to forsake all outward business and give himself fully to the contemplative life, then his own brothers and sisters and all his nearest friends and many others who know nothing of this manner of prayer and the way of living to which he has set himself, will rise up against him with much complaining and reprove him sharply and say he is *doing nothing*. Just as readily will they recall false tales, and many true ones, of the failures of men and women who have given themselves to such a life and they will not find one good tale of those who have not failed.

I do grant that many fall and have

fallen who have seemingly forsaken the world. That when they could have become servants and contemplatives of God, they became instead the servants and contemplatives of the devil himself—all because they refused to be ruled by the true teaching of the Spirit and followed their own selfish wills. In this way they came to be hypocrites and heretics—or fell into madness and wild ecstasies and other misfortunes (18).

Some think that I do little honor to Martha, that special saint, because I liken her words of complaint about her sister to the words of worldly men and their words to hers. Truly, I mean no dishonor to her nor to them. God forbid that I should in this book say anything that might be taken in condemnation of any of the servants of God in any degree, and particularly of this special saint. I think she should be

fully excused for her complaint when one considers the time and the manner in which it was spoken, because she spoke without knowing. It is no wonder she did not know at that time with what Mary was busy; for it would seem that before this she had heard very little of such perfection. Also what she said was spoken with kindness and in a few words; therefore she should always be excused.

I think, too, that these men and women living in the world should be fully excused for their complaining words even though they speak rudely what they say, when one considers their lack of knowing. Just as Martha knew very little of what Mary, her sister, did when she complained of her to our Lord so these folk nowadays know very little, if anything, of what these young disciples of God mean when they turn themselves from the world and are led to

a special devotion to God with much purity and righteousness of spirit. If they wisely understood, I dare say they would not speak as they do. Therefore I think they should always be excused because they know no better life than that which they themselves are living. When I think of the countless faults of ignorance that I have committed, both in act and word, I think that if I hope to be excused by God for my faults of unknowing that I should lovingly and understandingly excuse other men's words and acts committed through lack of knowing. Otherwise I surely do not do to others as I would that they did to me (19).

I think that those who set themselves to be contemplatives should not only excuse all those living active lives for their complaining words, but they should be so busy in spirit that they take little or no heed

of what any man does or says about them. This Mary did, when Martha her sister complained of her to our Lord and if we do as she did our Lord will also do for us as He did for Mary.

What did He do? Surely it was this. Our loving Lord Jesus, from whom nothing is hidden, when He was called upon by Martha to act as a judge and bid Mary to rise up and help her to serve Him, because He perceived that Mary's spirit was held in loving contemplation of His Godhead, very graciously, as it was quite right for Him to do, answered for her who would not leave off her prayer of love to answer for herself. How did He answer? Surely not as the judge to whom Martha appealed, but as an advocate He justly defended her who loved Him and said—*Martha, Martha!* Twice for her good He spoke her name for He wanted her to hear

Him and take good heed of His words: "Thou art very busy and troubled about many things." For they who live active lives must always be busy and laboring with the many things which they need to have first for themselves for their own use and then for the deeds of mercy to their fellow Christians. He said this because He would have Martha know that her busyness was good and profitable to the health of her soul, and yet because He would not have her think that it was the best work that a man might do, He added: "But one thing is necessary."

What is that one thing? Surely it is that God be loved and praised for Himself above all other occupations of the body or soul.

Our Lord said further to Martha that Mary had chosen the best part that should never be taken away from her. He added

this so that she would not think that she could love God and praise Him above all occupations and at the same time be busy about the necessities of this present life, or that she could serve God in a physical way and a spiritual way both at once. She might be able to do it imperfectly, but not perfectly. The complete yielding of all her desire to God, which begins here, is the same as that which shall last world without end in the fullness of God's Presence—for it is all one (20).

What does this mean, "Mary hath chosen the best?" Whenever the best is set forth and named there are before it two things—a good and a better; so that it can be the best and third in number. What are these three things of which Mary chose the best? There are not three states of religious living in the spiritual life—there are only two: the active life and the contemplative

life; and these two may be understood as being two separate ways of life as it is shown in the story of these two sisters, Martha and Mary; by Martha the active life, and by Mary the contemplative life. Without one of these two lives can no man be saved; and where there are only two, no man can choose the best.

Although there are only two ways of life, yet within them there are three parts, each one better than the other. These three we have already set forth in the order in which they come. The first part consists of good and honest physical works of mercy and charity; this is the first degree of active life, as it has been said in the beginning. The second part of these two consists of good spiritual meditations on a man's own wretchedness, on the suffering love of Christ, and on the joy of God's eternal Presence—just as we have said before. The

first part is good, the second part is better, for this is the second part of active life and the first part of contemplative life. In this part are the active and contemplative lives coupled together in a spiritual kinship and made sisters after the example of Mary and Martha. This high may an active come to contemplation, and no higher; except on rare occasions and by a special grace. This low may a contemplative come to an active life and no lower; except on rare occasions in times of great need.

The third part of these two lives hangs in the dark Cloud of Unknowing, with much solitary prayer to God for Himself alone. The first part is good, the second is better, but the third part is best of all. It can be plainly seen why our Lord did not say to Martha, Mary hath chosen the best life, for there are only the two lives, of two no man can choose the best. Yet of

these two lives *Mary hath chosen,* He said, *the best part, that which shall never be taken away from her.* The first part and the second, although they are both good and righteous, end with this life. For in the other life there shall be no necessity for works of mercy, nor any occasion to weep for one's sinfulness, nor to grieve for the suffering of Christ. Then shall men no longer hunger or thirst as they do now, nor die from cold, nor be sick, nor homeless, nor in prison, nor do they need burial for then they shall never die.

Therefore let all who are permitted by grace to choose the third part do so, or to put it more truly—whoever is chosen by God for that part, let him with much joy yield himself to it. This is the best part that shall never be taken away from him. It shall last forever.

Let the voice of our Lord cry to these

actives as though he were speaking now for us as he did for Mary to Martha—"Martha, Martha!" Actives, Actives! Be as busy as you can in this first part and in the second, now in one and now in the other—and if you desire and feel disposed work in both of them—be busy in them with much boldness. Yet meddle not with my contemplatives. You do not know what ails them. Let them be in their rest and in their work, with the third and best part of Mary (21).

Contemplatives, if we truly bring with all our heart our love and manner of life to conform to the love and manner of life of Mary, that is, as much as we are able to do through grace and the guiding of the spiritual teachings, there is no doubt but that He will answer in the same way for each one of us in the hearts of all those that either think or say anything against us. I do not say that there will not

always be some men who shall say and think somewhat against us while we struggle in this life, just as they did against Mary. But I do say, if we will give no more heed to their words or to their thoughts than she did—nor in any manner turn aside from our work of the spirit, then our Lord shall answer them in spirit (if those who so speak and think are sincere) in such a way that they shall be ashamed of their words and their thoughts within a few days.

As He answers for us in spirit, so will He stir other men in spirit to give us the necessary things that belong to this life, such as meat and clothes and all these other things, if He sees that we will not leave our work of love for great concern about them. This I am saying to refute the error of those who say that it is not right for a man to set himself to a life of contemplation and devotion to God unless he

has first secured for himself beforehand the necessaries of life. They say that "God helps those who help themselves." In truth they speak wrongly of God as they well know. You may be very certain, whoever you are who truly turns himself from the world unto God, that one of these following God will send without any special occupation on your own part—either an abundance of the necessities or else strength of body and patience in spirit to bear need. What then does it matter which a man has? For it is all one to a single-minded seeker. Whoever doubts this has given himself over to the powers of darkness that ever seek to defeat him and strip him of faith in the grace of God, or else he has not given himself to God as fully as he should. This is true of every person who doubts God's providence, no matter how practiced he is in meditation, or what holy reasons he gives to the contrary (23).

IV

Virtues: Imperfect and Perfect

"Be ye therefore perfect . . ."

✠

1. VIRTUES: IMPERFECT AND PERFECT

ONTEMPLATION NOT ONLY DESTROYS the ground and root of sin but creates virtue. If you would stand and not fall, never give up your intention toward God. Continue to beat forever on this Cloud of Unknowing that is between you and your God with a sharp dart of longing love. Labor hard that you may put down all thoughts less than those of God Himself. Do not leave this work no matter what happens. This is the only work that destroys the ground and root of self-love, which separates you from God-love. You may fast ever so much, or keep long vigils, getting up very early in the morning to do so; you may mortify your flesh ever so painfully; and if it were permitted,

which it is not, you could even put out your eyes, cut out your tongue, stop your ears and nose, completely mutilate your body, making it suffer in all the ways that you can think of. All of these things would not help you. Yet would self-love, the root of sin remain in you.

Yes, and what more? If you should weep ever so much when you meditate on your own worldly attachments, or on the suffering love of Christ, or rejoice ever so much when you think of the bliss of God's eternal Presence, what will happen? Surely very much that is good, much help, much profit and grace will they get for you. Yet in comparison to this pure longing love of your soul it counts very little. This deep desire for God is "the best part of Mary" without any other. These meditations without this pure adoration profit very little, or nothing at all.

If the work of prayer be truly conceived all virtue will be contained within it and therefore perfectly begun also. It will be known and felt without mixing any desire for it with the one true desire of the soul for God. If a man strive to have virtue without this singleness of desire these virtues are mixed with impure purposes and consequently are ever imperfect.

All virtue is nothing other than an ordered and measured affection plainly directed to God for Himself Alone. For He is the pure cause of all virtue—so much so that if a man were moved to desire virtue for any other cause—even though it is mixed with his desire for God—and indeed He is the chief of these desires—this virtue would be imperfect. This truth may be seen in one or two virtues more than in others, I mean in meekness and charity.

Whoever gets these two perfectly needs none other for he has them all (12).

2. IMPERFECT MEEKNESS—A TRUE KNOWING AND FEELING OF ONE'S SELF

What is meekness in itself? When is it perfect and when is it imperfect? Why is it imperfect when it is caused by anything mixed with God, although He be the chief cause and how is it perfect when it is caused by God Himself?

In the beginning we must know what meekness is in itself if this matter of perfect and imperfect meekness is to be seen. Then one can understand more truly the cause of it. Meekness is none other than a true knowing and feeling of man's self as he is. Certainly anyone who truly knows and feels himself as he is, would be per-

fectly meek. There are two causes of this meekness—one is the filth, the wretchedness, the misery, the frailty of man into which he has fallen because he turned from loving and obeying God to loving and obeying creatures. Now he must always feel to some degree the pain of this separation as long as he lives in his earthly body, no matter how singlehearted he may become. The second reason for meekness is the overabundant love and supreme greatness of God Himself—in the sight of which all nature quakes, all philosophers are fools, all saints and powers of light are blind. So much so that had He not through the wisdom of His Godhead measured Himself to their ability to behold Him, I cannot say what would have happened to them. This second cause of meekness is perfect for it shall last forever. The other is imperfect for it shall not only fall at the end

of this life, but it happens very often that the grace of God so increases the love of the soul for Himself that man completely loses himself, forgetting entirely his own being and not caring whether he is pure or impure. Whether this happens often or seldom to a soul that is working in this work, it lasts but for a little while—this I know. During this time the soul is completely meeked for it knows nor feels no cause for meekness except God Himself. Whenever he knows and feels this perfect cause of meekness mixed with the knowing and feeling of himself, then it is imperfect meekness, even though God be the chief cause. Nevertheless, this imperfect meekness is good and MUST be had; and God forbid that you understand it in any other way than the way I say (13).

This knowing and feeling of myself as I am must always be imperfect meekness.

Yet I would rather have a true knowing and feeling of myself as I am, and I think it would get me the perfect cause of meekness, if not the virtue of meekness itself, sooner than if all the saints and powers of light and all the men and women of the church living on earth, in all degrees of devout living, were altogether to begin at one time, to do nothing else than to pray to God for me to have perfect meekness. Indeed, it is impossible for a sinner to get perfect meekness, or to keep it once he has gotten it, except he first have this imperfect meekness.

Therefore struggle and sweat in every way you can to get a true knowing and feeling of yourself as you are; and then I think you will soon have a true knowing and feeling of God as He is. Not as He is in Himself, for that no man may have but God Himself . . . but as it is possible and

as He permits it to be known and felt by a meek soul living in this mortal body.

Do not think that because I have given two causes for meekness, one perfect and the other imperfect, that I want you to leave off your struggle for imperfect meekness and set yourself wholly to get the perfect. No, for I know you would never get it in this way. I put it this way because I long for you to see the worthiness of this spiritual exercise above all others, either physical or spiritual, that any man can or may work in through grace; how single desire in a pure heart set upon this dark Cloud of Unknowing between you and your God, has contained within it perfect meekness without any special contemplation on anything less than God; also because I wanted you to know what perfect meekness is, and to set it as a mark for your heart, both for yourself and for

me. By such knowledge I would make you more meek.

It often happens that lacking this knowledge there is cause for pride, or so it seems to me. Perhaps if you did not know what perfect meekness was, you would think that when you had a little knowing and feeling of this, which I call imperfect meekness, you would think that you had nearly gotten perfect meekness; and so you would deceive yourself, and think you were very meek, when you were all wrapped up in foul, stinking pride.

3. PERFECT MEEKNESS—CAUSED BY THE SUPREME LOVE OF GOD HIMSELF

Struggle constantly for perfect meekness for when you come to this state you will no longer be lost in love of self or any other

creature—because then you will be lost in God. Never afterward will you be much apart from Him (14).

Have faith that there is this perfect meekness that I tell you of and that it may be had by grace in this life. This I say to refute the error of those who hold that the most perfect cause of meekness is found in beholding both the wretchedness and the fruit of sin.

I do grant that for ordinary sinners, such as I have been, this beholding of one's sinfulness is the most necessary and helpful cause for meekness. Yet there is another cause for meekness as far above this one as the lives of saints are above the lives of the most sinful penitents—or the life of Christ is above the life of any man in this world, or the holy ones in God's presence are above the frailest creatures on this earth. This perfect meekness belongs

to those who have rubbed away a great part of the rust of sin by a true knowing and feeling of their own wretchedness apart from God. It is also for those who have never willfully nor knowingly turned from God to creatures, but have done so only through frailty and ignorance and have already set themselves to become contemplatives.

If it were true that there were no more perfect cause to be meeked under than this feeling and knowing of one's self, then I would inquire of those who have never seen nor known the desire to sin, what is the cause of their meekness—such as that of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His blessed mother, and all the saints and holy ones who have been forever in His Presence? It was to this perfection and all other that our Lord called us in the Gospel,

bidding us that we should be perfect by grace as He is Himself by nature (15).

No man needs to think that he is presumptuous in daring to offer himself to God as a contemplative even though he has been the worst kind of a sinner in this life. He may offer to God the meek longing love of his heart and in secret set himself to beat on this Cloud of Unknowing that is between him and his God. First, however, he must do all that he can to amend for his former willfulness and sinfulness, coming to this interior prayer under the leading of his conscience and his spiritual teachers.

Our Lord said to Mary, a sinner above all sinners to be called to the contemplative life, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." He said this not because of her deep contrition for her sins, nor because she knew and felt her own wretched state, nor for the

meekness that she had because of it. Why then? Surely because she loved much.

Here one can see what a silent contemplating love will secure from God, above all other work that a man can conceive. I do readily grant that she did have much sorrow and wept bitterly because of her sins, and that she had much meekness of spirit when she looked upon her miserable life apart from God. We, too, have given ourselves over to self-love and have separated ourselves from God for most of our lifetime, and we should, too, suffer woe and sorrow because of our sins and become very meek because of them.

But how? Surely as Mary did. Although she never could unfeel the deep sorrow that she carried in her heart because of her sins, for all her life she had them with her wherever she went, as a burden bound up together and laid in the hole of her

heart; yet she had a more painful sorrow than this, a more grievous longing, a deeper yearning. She suffered almost to death for lack of love, even while she had much love. Do not wonder at this for it is the condition of a true lover that the more he loves the more he longs to love. In all this longing of her soul she suffered more than when she looked upon her own sinfulness. This is confirmed by the Scriptures. Within her heart there was a sadness because she knew her sins had made a separation between her and her God whom she loved very much and she knew, too, that these very sins were in large part the cause of the agony she endured for love's sake. But what of that?

Did she come down from the heights of her desire for God and into the deeps of her sinful life and search in the foul, stinking swamps and dunghills of her sins

digging them up one by one, with all the circumstances surrounding them and sorrow and weep over them, each one by itself? No, most surely she did not do this. Why? Because God let her know by His grace within her soul that she should never come to His Presence in this way. Instead she might bring herself more easily to turn from Him and never win full forgiveness for her sins. Therefore she hung up her love and her longing desire in this Cloud of Unknowing and learned to love a thing which she might not see clearly by the light of her understanding and imagination, nor entirely feel in the fullness of love in her affections . . . (16).

Therefore when you set out to be a contemplative as Mary was, choose to be made meek by the marvelous and wondrous greatness of God, which is the perfect cause, rather than by your own

wretchedness, which is imperfect. This means pure contemplation on the greatness of God rather than on your own wretchedness. To them that are perfectly meek nothing shall be lacking either for the spirit or for the body. For they have God, in whom is all plenty; whoever has Him—as this book tells you—needs nothing else in this life (23).

4. CHARITY—LOVE OF GOD FOR HIMSELF

As has been said of meekness that it is subtly hidden and fully enfolded in this pure act of love toward God within this Cloud of Unknowing, when all other things are put down and forgotten—so are all other virtues to be thought of, particularly charity.

For charity means nothing other than

love of God for Himself above all creatures, and of men for God's sake even as God loves you. That in this work of contemplation God is loved for Himself above all creatures is indeed true. As I have said before, the substance of this work is nothing other than a pure intent directed unto God for Himself.

A naked intent I call it because in this work a perfect apprentice asks neither for a release from pain, nor for an increase of reward, nor for anything other than God Himself. So much so that he neither heeds nor cares whether he is in pain or pleasure, but only that the will of Him Whom he loves is done. It would seem that in such work God is perfectly loved for Himself above all creatures. During the time of his contemplation the most perfect worker does not permit even the purest creature that ever God made to be equal

to Him, nor to be associated with Him. In this pure desire for God the second branch of charity—that is, for one's fellow Christian—is completely included. As proof of this it may be seen that a perfect lover of God has no special regard for any man whether he is a kinsman or a stranger, a friend or a foe. All men become alike kin to him, and no man a stranger. All men he thinks are his friends and none his foes. He thinks that those who hurt him and cause him pain in this life are his true and special friends, and he is moved to wish for them as much good as for the dearest friend he has (24).

. . . By virtue of this work he shall be made so virtuous and so charitable that ever afterwards his will, when it comes down from his contemplation to converse or to pray with his fellow Christians, is directed as easily to his foe as to his friend, to

the stranger as to his kin. Sometimes more to his foe than to his friend. If you will look you will see that he never leaves this work completely for he could not do that without turning away from God—but he comes down from these heights when love demands him to do so for a useful and necessary cause.

He who is fully occupied in his desire for God has no time in this work to consider who is friend or foe, kin or stranger. I do not say that he does not feel sometimes, very often in fact, more affection for one or two than for all others—and this is quite right, for it is necessary for love. Christ felt closer affection for John and Mary and Peter than He did for many others. In the time of this work, however, all shall be equally dear, because the worker can find no other cause for loving than God Himself. Each is loved equally

and purely for God's sake as well as for his own.

All men were separated from God when Adam turned from obedience to his Creator and gave himself over to obedience to creatures; yet each man when he has proved by his devotion to this work his will to turn back to God, he will be saved or brought again to true oneness with the will of God, by the love of Christ. [The suffering love of Christ was proof of His perfect love for God and man. By love are all things shared.] Not in the same manner, of course, but in the same spirit, every man that completely yields himself to this work so that his will becomes one with the will of God, is able to will the same wholeness for all men that he himself knows and feels. Those who have given themselves to a life of contemplation have proved this.

When a limb of our body feels sore, all the other limbs are distressed and in pain; if a limb fares well, all the others fare well also—so it is with all the limbs of the church. Christ is our head, and we are the limbs, if we are abiding perfectly in His love. Whoever would be a perfect disciple of our Lord must strain up his soul for this spiritual work so that he may be able to bring his brothers and sisters in nature back to God just as our Lord did with His body on the cross.

How is he to do this? Not only for his friends, and his kin, and his loved ones, but generally for all mankind without any more regard for one above another. For all those who will leave off their self-seeking and ask mercy shall be brought back to God by virtue of His loving desire for them (25).

This perfect love of God and one's fel-

low creatures does not abide in the heart in which self-love abides. Now you ask how you can destroy this regard for yourself, this knowing and feeling of your own being, and how you can be lost in the knowing and feeling of God (as it is possible in this life). Perhaps you think that if self-love were destroyed all other hindrances would be destroyed.

In this you think aright. In answer I say—that without a very special grace freely given by God, and also without a full willingness on your part to receive this grace, this knowing and feeling of yourself cannot be in any way destroyed. This ableness to receive God's love and restrain self-love is nothing other than a strong and deep spiritual sorrow.

In this sorrow you will need to have discretion so that you will not go beyond your physical and spiritual strength,

straining yourself rudely; rather sit very still, as though you were asleep, plunged and sunk in sorrow. This is true sorrow; this is perfect sorrow; and such by necessity it must be if you are to win above yourself. All men have occasion for sorrow, but most of all the man who knows and feels the sorrow of his own being. All other sorrow compared to this is like a game to real life. He is most able to sorrow who knows and feels not only what he is, but that he is—a being apart from God. Who has never felt this sorrow let him sorrow indeed; for he has never felt perfect sorrow.

This sorrow when it comes, cleanses the soul not only of sin, but also of the pain that sin deserves—it makes the soul able to receive the cleansing joy of freedom from its own being.

If this sorrow is real it is full of desire

for purity; if it were not so a man could not endure it. If the soul were not somewhat strengthened in its good deeds during this time, he could not endure the pain that he has in knowing and feeling his own being. The greatness of his sorrow lies in the fact that though he would pray with a single desire for a true feeling and knowing of God (as is possible in this earthly body), yet he feels that he cannot because his knowing and feeling are always busy with the foul stinking lump of himself, which he must always hate and despise and forsake, if he is to be God's perfect disciple, learning from Him alone what is perfection. In this state he nearly goes mad with sorrow. He weeps and wails, strives and curses and denounces himself—he thinks that the burden of himself is so heavy that he does not care what happens to him, so long as God's will is done within

him. But with all this sorrow he desires not to un-be, for that would be madness and contempt for God. He is thankful for his life, and praises God for the high calling he has as a man, even while he desires to be free of the knowing and feeling of himself.

This sorrow and this desire must every soul have in some form or another, just in the manner that God permits him to have it, and according to his ableness to endure it, before he can be fully oned with God in perfect love (such a perfection as may be had in this life), if God so wills it (44).

V

The Inner World

"The inner man calleth it ALL"

✣

1. FACULTIES OF THE MIND

IN ORDER THAT YOU MAY BETTER understand my teaching on spiritual matters—for I speak but as a simple man—and in order that you will make no error as to where your spirit works, I will give you further enlightenment on the meaning of the various states. As we have said before, your spirit may work beneath you and outside of yourself, or within you and even with yourself, or it may be above you and under God.

All material things are without your soul and beneath it in their nature. Indeed although the sun and the moon and all the stars are above your body, they are lower than you in their nature.

All spiritual beings, all other souls and

messengers of God's goodness, even though they are very high and very rich in the grace of God and have all virtue and are above you in purity, are of the same nature as yourself. This essence or nature within yourself consists of the faculties of your soul, three of which are principal—mind, reason and will; two of which are secondary—imagination and sensuality.

There is nothing above you in nature except God.

Whenever *yourself* or *you* is spoken of in a spiritual way, its meaning is of your soul and not of your body. The thing with which you work is judged in accordance with your soul as to whether it is beneath you, within you or above you in nature (62).

The mind [the conscious and unconscious] does not work of itself. Reason and will are active faculties as are the

imagination and senses. The mind contains these four within itself. So it cannot be said that the mind works unless the containing within itself these powers may be called work. I call some of the faculties of the soul principal and some secondary. Not because the soul is divisible, for that is not possible, but because those things with which they work are different, some principal or spiritual and some secondary or material. The two principal working faculties—reason and will—only work with those things immaterial in nature, without the help of the other two. The imagination and senses work with material things whether they are present to the senses or not, and they work in these for the sake of the body and with the help of the physical senses. By them without the help of reason and of will a man could never come to know the moral and physi-

cal nature of living creatures, nor could he learn the cause of their existence nor could he understand the things they do.

It is for this cause that reason and will are called principal faculties, for they work in that which is purely abstract without any material form. The imagination and senses are secondary because they work with material things with the five senses. Mind is called a principal faculty because it contains in itself not only all these faculties but also all those things in which they work.

My explanation of this follows (63):

2. REASON

Reason is the judging faculty, by which we separate evil from good, evil from worse, good from the better, the worse from the worst, the better from the best.

Before man separated himself from God [his reason turned from the Creator to creatures] this faculty was fitted to make perfect judgments by its very nature, but now it is so blinded by its own separation from God that it can no longer do so unless it is enlightened by grace.

Both reason and the thing with which it works are contained within the mind (64).

Now you ask, "Why does my reason press in upon me so when I long to be occupied in contemplating God alone?" You say, "Sometimes when I listen to him I think his words have surpassing strength and at other times he makes me cry out of compassion for the suffering of Christ and at other times for my own wickedness and for many other good reasons that would seem to be very holy and do me a great deal of good."

I think that this is surely a well-put question and although I am not a very able teacher, I will do what I can to answer it.

First, you ask why your reason is so persistent when you would give your attention to God alone, why it offers to help you. I say that there is then a sharpening and clarifying of your thinking, and that your reasoning arises from within your soul. When you ask if it is good, or evil, I say that in its nature it must always be good, for it is a reflection of the likeness of God Himself. Its use may be good or evil. Good when by this grace you see with more clearness your own low state, the suffering love, the kindness and marvelous works of God among all His creatures, mortal and immortal. Then it is that it increases your devotion very much, and it is no wonder.

It is evil when the soul is blown up with pride and aroused to think that it has much learning and scholarship, such as do clerics who press forward to be looked upon as persons of great wisdom. Then it is that the soul has its learning from the powers of darkness and becomes a master of vanity and falsehood, rather than being a meek learner and master of holy knowledge. It is evil too when anyone uses this sharpening of his wits to increase his pride, to get for himself unusual skill in worldly and temporal affairs, and when because of it he has desire for worldly fame, wealth, pleasure and flattery (8).

3. WILL

Will is that faculty by which we choose good after it has been determined by rea-

son; and by which we love good, desire good, and finally rest completely satisfied in the good. Before man chose to love himself rather than God his will could not be deceived in its choosing, in its loving, or in its work, for it could by its nature perceive everything as it was. Now it is not so unless it is anointed by grace. For still there remains in it the disease of disobedience, and it continues to perceive a thing for good that is very evil, and also that which has but an appearance of good, as good.

Both the will and the thing that it wills, the mind contains and enfolds within itself (64).

4. IMAGINATION

The *imagination* is the faculty by which we portray all images of absent and pres-

ent things. Both it and the thing with which it works are contained in the mind. Before man turned from obeying God to obeying creatures, the imagination was so obedient to the reason, to which it is a servant, that it never created any distorted image of any material thing [an illusion] nor any misleading image of anything immaterial [hallucination]. Now the imagination falls into these errors. If the imagination were not restrained by the light of grace in the reason, it never would cease from creating all sorts of fantasies or visions—which are nothing other than perceiving the immaterial as material and the material as immaterial. This work of the imagination is always false and is next to error.

This disobedience of the imagination may be plainly seen in those who have recently turned from the world and are

especially fervent in their time of prayer. Before the imagination is restrained in part by the light of grace in their reason, they cannot in any way comprehend the marvelous and diverse thoughts and fantasies and images that arise and are imprinted on their mind by an overly excited imagination. The imagination becomes restrained after attentive and frequent meditations on spiritual matters such as one's own wretchedness, the suffering love and kindness of our Lord God, and many other such matters. This disobedience of the imagination is the fruit of man's original disobedience (65).

5. SENSUALITY

Sensuality is that faculty of the soul that goes out into the body and governs the physical sense or knowledge. Through it we have a knowing and feeling of all ob-

jects of creation, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant. It has two functions—one that cares for the needs of the body and the other that seeks satisfaction for its hungers. It grumbles when the body is in need, and stirs us to take more than is needed to gratify our hunger and further our desires. It grumbles when it is not surrounded with comforts for its body, it is greedy for physical ease and luxuriates in comfortable surroundings. It grumbles when things are unpleasant and is overdelighted when discomforts are removed.

Both its power and the thing with which it works are contained in the mind.

Before man became disobedient to God, his senses were so obedient to his will, to which it was meant to be a servant, that it never led to excessive pleasure or displeasure in worldly things, nor took fantasy for sensual experience.

Now it is not so. A man is somewhat

saved because in his will is grace, which brings the senses low, and causes them to suffer and restrains them from lust and greed when physical pleasures are placed before them, and from too great looseness when their helpful disciplines are removed. [Re-formed by grace, sensuality once again serves the will.] If this were not true man would wretchedly and wantonly welter—as a pig in the mud—in the wealths of this world and in the foulness of the flesh, growing ever more and more beastlike and less and less like a man with an eternal soul (66).

Now you ask about your appetites, and how you are to restrain them when you are working in this work, and if you should use discretion in this prayer because of them.

I answer you— Indeed none! In all your other life you shall have discretion, as in

eating and drinking, and in sleeping, and in keeping your body from too much cold or heat, and in long praying or reading, or in conversation with your fellow Christians. In all of these have great care that they are neither too much, nor too little. But in this work hold no measure, for I would have you never leave off this work as long as you live.

I do not say that you will continue always in the freshness of spirit you have at times, for that cannot be. Sometimes sickness and other disordered dispositions of the body and soul will hinder you; then, too, the necessities of nature will come in your way and draw you from contemplation. Nevertheless, I say again you should always be in this work, either in act or in will. Beware of sickness for the love of God, just as much as you can, so it will not be the cause of your lack of strength

in this work. I tell you that this work requires a great sereneness, wholeness, and evenness of disposition, both of body and soul.

Therefore, for God's love govern yourself with great care that you may keep your health if you are able. Yet if sickness comes in spite of this carefulness, have patience and bide meekly waiting for God's mercy; that is quite good enough. I tell you in truth that patience in sickness and in other tribulations pleases God much more than any delightful devotion you might have in health (41).

You ask how you shall govern yourself in regard to meat, drink and sleep and other things needful to your body. To this I answer— Take what comes! Go on ever with this work without ceasing and without carefulness and you shall know very well when to begin and to cease in all

other works with proper discretion. I cannot believe that a soul continuing in this work night and day, without holding back can err in any of the outward affairs of his life—if he does he would err in any manner of life.

Therefore if I can come to an attentive and busy beholding of the spiritual work of my soul, I then could have heedlessness in regard to my eating and drinking, my sleeping and speaking, and all my outward doings. I would rather come to such carefulness in them by such heedlessness to them than by careful attention to each one of them, as though I needed to mark and measure them. By such care it never could be brought about in spite of anything that I could do or say. Let men say what they will, the proof witnesses otherwise. Therefore lift up your heart with a pure prayer of love, and mean now

SIN and now GOD. God you would have and sin you would lack. God is lacking to you and sin you are sure of.

Now may the good God help you, for NOW you have need of Him (42).

6. REFORMATION OF MAN'S MIND IN THIS WORK

Behold then, spiritual friend, into what confusion the faculties of the mind have fallen because man chose to love himself and creatures rather than God, the Creator. Why wonder then that we are blind and easily deceived in understanding spiritual truths and work—and more certainly so when we do not understand the faculties of the soul and the manner in which they were first appointed to work.

Know this that whenever you are occupied with some material thing, no matter

to how good a purpose, the soul is beneath and beyond itself; whenever you are occupied with the inner states of your soul, and its workings in spiritual or immaterial matters—either vices or virtues—either within yourself or in another, your soul is even with itself and with you in nature. In so working you learn to know yourself and to further your own wholeness or perfection. Then you are within yourself and even with yourself.

Whenever you feel your mind occupied with no kind of thing, either material or spiritual, but with the pure Being of God, as it is set forth in this book, then you are above yourself and beneath God. You are above yourself here because you have come by grace where you could not come by nature. You are then oned with God in spirit, in love and in harmony of will. Yet you are nevertheless beneath God.

You are one in spirit, not two, because when any soul comes to perfection in this work he may be truly called a god as the Scripture says: *Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? He called them gods, unto whom the word of God came.*[1] This is said because of one-head with Him. Nevertheless you are beneath Him. He is God by nature without beginning and you once were nothing in being or nature.

Afterward when you had being by His power and love, you willfully separated yourself from Him and made yourself worse than nothing. It is only by His mercy without any deserving on your part that He may make you a god by grace, one with Him in spirit—and then nothing can separate you either here on earth, nor in the fullness of life beyond time. Although you are so oned with Him by

[1] John 10:34-35.

grace, you are very far beneath Him in nature . . . (67).

. . . Now I bid you: see that you are in no way within yourself, nor out of yourself, nor above yourself, nor behind yourself, nor at one side of yourself, nor the other side of yourself.

Then you say where shall I be? Nowhere?

Now you speak well—that is where I would have you! Nowhere in material things is everywhere in spiritual. See to it that your spirit is not in any way fastened to any worldly thing or place. Wherever your mind willfully works, you are there in spirit, just as truly as if your body were there in act. In this state your mind will find nothing to feed on and will say you are "doing nothing." Do then this nothing, and do it for God's sake. Cease not but be busily struggling on in this nothing

with an ever watchful desire to will to have God, whom no man may know.

I tell you truly that I would rather be nowhere in body, wrestling with that hidden nothing, than to be such a great Lord that whenever I wanted I could be everywhere in body playing merrily with everything, just as a lord does with his own.

Leave be this everywhere and this everything and choose this nowhere and this nothing. Do not be anxious because your mind does not comprehend this nothing —for surely I like it so, much the better. This nothing is so supreme that the mind cannot comprehend it. This nothing is better felt than seen; for it is very hidden and very dark to them that have looked upon it but for a little while. To put it more truly, I would say that the soul is more blinded by the superabundance of

spiritual light than by any darkness or the lack of physical light.

Who is he that calls it nothing? Surely it is our outer man, not our inner. Our inner man calls it ALL; for by it he is taught to understand all things, both material and spiritual without any special contemplation on any one thing apart from itself (68).

Wonderfully is a man's disposition changed by feeling within his spirit this nothing nowhere wrought. At first, when the soul looks upon it, he finds there all the particular sins he has ever committed since he was born—both in body and in spirit. Each one of them is separately and darkly painted on it—and wherever he turns they will appear before his eyes until there comes a time—a time of hard travail, sore sighing and woeful weeping. Then they are washed away.

Sometimes he thinks in this struggle when he gazes upon this nothing nowhere wrought that he is looking upon unfathomable darkness filled with demons of despair and evil—a total depravity of light—and he loses hope of winning wholeness and peace out of all this pain.

This far inward have many come but because of the greatness of the pain and lacking strength, they turn back to worldly affairs, and seek material comforts in place of the spiritual strength to which they might have come could they have endured the struggle.

He who endures sometimes feels some comfort and has some hope of perfection because now he sees that many of his former particular sins are rubbed away by the grace of God. Although he continues to feel pain, he has hope that it shall come to an end since it waxes less

and less. This is the time that is called *purgatory* or cleansing.

Afterward there comes a time when he cannot find any particular sin written on this nothing nowhere wrought, but he feels that sin is a lump—he does not know what unless it is himself. This feeling and knowing of himself as a lump of sin is called the root and pain of original sin [or man's self-chosen separateness from God]. There are then times when he feels this nothing is Paradise—or the Presence and light of God Himself, because of fullness of life, and strength, and power and joy. Then again, he thinks it is God Himself because of the love and wholeness in which he lives.

It matters not what he thinks, for he will find evermore a Cloud of Unknowing between him and his God (69).

Struggle ever in this nothing and in

this nowhere; leave your senses and your imagination and all they work in. I tell you in truth that this nothing nowhere wrought is not comprehended by them. With your physical eyes you cannot conceive anything except by its length, its smallness and greatness, its roundness and squareness, its farness and nearness, and its color. By your ears nothing except noise and some kind of sound. By your nose nothing except stench and savor. By your taste nothing except sour and sweet, salt and fresh, bitter and pleasant. By your feeling nothing except hot and cold, hard and tender, soft and sharp.

God and spiritual things have none of these qualities or quantities. Leave your outer senses and do not work with them, neither within nor without. Those who set themselves to contemplation of God and think they should hear, smell, see,

taste or feel spiritual things within or without, are surely deceived and work against the course of nature.

For the senses and imagination were ordained by nature to perceive the outer material world and no man can know it with his reason and will. All those things that cannot be told us by our senses are spiritual and not material. Therefore it is with our reason and will that we labor when we would know spiritual or immaterial things. Yet even reason and will are not fitting faculties when we would know God.

A man may have ever so much understanding by his reasoning about created immaterial things, but by this faculty he cannot come to know the uncreated Spirit —which is nothing other than God. By the failing of his reason he may come to know Him. For that in which he fails is

nothing other than God Himself. It is for this cause that St. Denis said, "The most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing . . ." (70).

VI

Who Are Called to This Work

✠

IF YOU THINK THAT YOU ARE NOT fitted either in body or soul for this work of contemplation, you may leave it and take up another work quite safely and without blame. Counsel first with your own conscience and spiritual teachers. If you do leave it, I hope you will hold me excused. It was my purpose to be of help to you with what simple knowledge I have of the life of the spirit.

Read it over two or three times—the oftener, the better will you understand it. Perhaps, at first, there will be sentences that are very hard, yet on a second reading you will think them easy. Indeed, to my mind it seems impossible how any soul disposed to this work should read it, or speak it, or hear it read or spoken without being at the time in accord with the work.

If you think that it does you some good, give hearty thanks to God for it, and for God's love pray for me, too.

Take heed to this: I pray for God's love too, that you will let none see this book unless it is such a one as I have spoken of before—saying who might work in contemplative prayer and when they should begin. If you let any such persons read this book I charge you to bid them to read it all . . .

As for worldly chatterers, self-praisers and blamers, tale-bearers, gossipers, and all kinds of faultfinders, I do not care if they ever see this book. It is not my intention to write such a book for them, and it is better that they do not meddle with this one. I would say the same to all curiosity seekers, whether they be learned or unlearned, even though they may be good men in their daily lives, this book could mean little to them (74).

All those who read this book or hear it read or spoken and in this reading and hearing consider it good and pleasing to their thinking, are not called by God to a life of contemplative prayer. This desire arising while they read is not sufficient. It arises perhaps out of the natural excitement that comes to their minds as they read, rather than from any call of grace.

Let them prove from whence this desire arises. It can be proved in this way:

First, let them examine themselves to see if they have done all they are able to cleanse themselves from sin and have made what amends they are able. If so, it is so far well. If they would know more clearly that this call is from God, let them examine themselves to see if this desire of their wills presses in upon their minds more than any other spiritual exercise or prayer. If nothing that they do, either physically or spiritually, satisfies their souls except

this inner prayer of love set upon the Cloud of Unknowing so that it seems the chief of all their work, then it is a token that God has called them to it. Otherwise they surely are not called.

I do not say that this longing love shall be ever with them and dwell always in the minds of those that are so called. This is not true.

The actual feeling of this desire is often withdrawn from a young apprentice in this work of the spirit for different reasons. Sometimes because he might presume upon it and think it is of his own creating, and that he can have it when and as he likes. Such thinking is pride. Whenever this feeling of grace is withdrawn it is pride that causes its withdrawal—not actual pride, but rather pride that would be if the feeling of grace were not withdrawn. For this reason many young fools

think that God is their enemy when He is very much their Friend. Sometimes this feeling of grace is withdrawn because of carelessness. When this is the cause they soon suffer a very bitter pain that bites them sorely. Sometimes the Lord will delay the return of this feeling of grace for a purpose, since by delay it will grow to be more esteemed when it is found again after being long thought lost. When there has been such a delay and such a long lack of this desire within the soul, it comes suddenly without being sought for, with a great fervor of longing and a greater love and stirring to work in this work than ever before. Then, there is more joy in finding it than there was sorrow in losing it.

This I say is the surest and highest token of one's call to the work . . . no matter what manner of man he is or has

been. For in God's merciful eyes it is not what you are or have been, but what you would be.

Of the delaying of this grace St. Gregory says: "All holy desires grow by delays; and if they wane by delays, then were they never holy desires." If a man find less and less joy in the new discoveries of his soul, even though the desires are good in their very essence, they are nevertheless not holy desires. St. Austin says of this holy desire "that all the life of a Christian man is nought else but holy desire."

Farewell, spiritual friend, you have God's blessing and mine. I pray Almighty God that true peace, perfect guidance, spiritual strength and an abundance of grace may evermore be with you and all God's lovers on earth (75). Amen.

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